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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 002053

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL POLITICS: TAYYIP BEY STILL IN CHARGE?

REF: ISTANBUL 1734

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Istanbul Mayor Kadir Topbas captured the city's attention last month when he fired Istanbul Deputy Mayor Idris Gulluce, following intense media speculation that Gulluce was the real power behind the throne. The move allowed Topbas to regain "face," but privately contacts have told us that while Gulluce was scapegoated for the sake of public perception, he continues to enjoy both grassroots support and support from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Gulluce has since been elected Chairman of the Municipal Assembly and named supporters to head the Assembly's planning and zoning commissions. End Summary.

2. (U) Front page news: The dismissal of Istanbul deputy-mayor Idris Gulluce November 8 and subsequent resignation of the municipal Secretary General and Deputy Secretary, both Gulluce supporters, roiled municipal politics

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and sparked speculation about disarray in the city's ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party. Rumors that Gulluce was the real power behind the municipality's throne had been circulating for weeks and emerged in the press in the wake of controversial plans to build a mosque in Kadikoy's Goztepe Park (reftel) and to launch a third bridge project on the Bosphorus. In a November 8 statement announcing Gulluce's dismissal, Mayor Topbas said he had no personal problems with the Deputy Mayor, but that "media speculation could lead people to think I have no more control of the authority voters gave me." To prevent that, he said, he had to make a "radical decision."

3. (C) Sacked, but still supported: On the surface this development allowed Mayor Topbas to save face with the public, and he has since projected control by calling off the unpopular third bridge project. Privately, however, contacts have told us that Gulluce was scapegoated for the sake of public perception, and that he still exercises great influence. Prior to the sacking, a poll had shown support for the AKP in Istanbul declining by 13 percent, with some observers attributing the dip to Gulluce's outspokenness on the Goztepe Park mosque and other "conservative" antics. Yildiz University political scientist Fulya Atacan told us November 29 that, regardless of what caused the dip in popularity, PM Erdogan was obliged to support Topbas over Gulluce, as Topbas was a longtime loyal supporter. Press reports had speculated that the Prime Minister must have tacitly approved the firing. Atacan did not rule that out, but maintained that Gulluce still has the Prime Minister's support.

4. (C) "The Mayor is honest, but weak": CHP's leader in the Municipal Assembly and Deputy Mayor of Besiktas municipality Kemal Akar told us November 22 that Prime Minister Erdogan, when selecting a mayoral candidate last year, had been intent on finding someone who would not surface as a competitor or outshine him, as he had outshone then Prime Minister Erbakan in the 1990s during his term as Istanbul Mayor. Akar said Gulluce had also been a candidate, and had likely enjoyed greater grassroots support, but that Erdogan chose Topbas instead for this reason. In order to placate Gulluce, Akar claimed, the Prime Minister arranged that he would co-govern the city with Topbas, in a specially created "Deputy Mayor" position. (Note: Professor Atacan confirmed that such a position had not existed before. Since Gulluce's firing, the position has been abolished. End note.) Akar considers the Mayor to be honest and sincere, but says "he is weak, and they do not leave him alone," adding that "decisions are not made in Istanbul; the Prime Minister wants to run Istanbul himself."

5. (C) Reshuffling commissions: Meanwhile, Gulluce, considered to be of the more conservative, "Milli Gorus" (National View, note: closely affiliated with Necmettin Erbakan and his Islamic political parties) flank of the party, maintains strong support in the Istanbul Municipal Assembly, which subsequently elected him Chairman with a large majority. Akar told us Gulluce is now shuffling the Assembly's commission chairmanships, as revenge for his sacking, and replaced Tankut Gundogar, a more "liberal name"

who headed up the planning commission, with a more conservative individual from Kartal district. Sefer Kocabas, AKP Istanbul Chairman Mehmet Muezzinoglu's business partner, was reportedly elected as the head of the all-important Zoning Commission.

16. (C) Comment: The house-cleaning has enabled Mayor Topbas to reinforce his public profile as the man in charge in Istanbul, but behind the scenes the situation remains much murkier. With Gulluce's continued influence in the assembly and apparent ability to send Topbas proteges (like Gundogar) packing, soon after they had made the jump to politics and public service from the business world, further fireworks are a distinct possibility. End Comment.

JONES